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BEDWYR WILLIAMS

Bedwyr Williams: *My Bad*
Ikon, Birmingham
16 May – 8 July

With *My Bad*, Welsh artist Bedwyr Williams takes a sidestep away from what has been a predominantly performance-based practice, inspired by the actuality of living in the strange, car-boot sale-and-chapel coast of north Wales. And yet the pathos of failure that comes from that hybrid, marginal place continues to inform the work. Like a rain-soaked funfair on *Father Ted's* Craggy Island, the objects on show at Ikon aspire to do more than they are capable of doing. They are the abandoned props from a Christmas school play; without the lead performer, they become haunted, displaced, depressing, but also amusingly poetic.

This is initially apparent in *Sentry Box* (all works 2012), an upturned oversize candy-striped checkpoint wedged between the banisters on the second floor landing of the gallery. It highlights Williams's uncanny talent for finding underlying comic connections between supposedly separate ideas. For example, *Sentry Box* recalls an event he witnessed while accompanying his grandfather to a Welsh sheepdog trial, where a toilet tent blew over and drifted across a field of frightened sheep. But the red and white chevrons are also reminiscent of the booms found at European checkpoints, of the accommodation used to house action-man toys or even an oversize guard dog kennel.

These subtle multilayered references to war and defence are also visible in *Ikon Under Siege*. Here, sandbags surround the gallery entrance and every window is taped up with masking tape crosses. An accompanying exhibition text informs viewers that a bomb-proof film already exists on the inside of these windows, following an IRA bomb attack during the 1970s. The artist was warned to take care when removing his masking tape because it risked damaging this bomb-proof film. Williams's lumbering attempt at reinforcing the building by taping over existing defences is therefore comically and clumsily doomed.

The Heron is another example of failure. A bullnose awning, similar to the entrance seen in TV show *Cheers*, is supposed to engender a sense of security and protection from the elements. This half-guest, half-pedestrian space is pierced

and punctured by a fallen lamppost, the sudden rip of jaundice streetlight unsettling that which appears to be safe.

Comedy like this in contemporary art is often seen as the browbeaten poor cousin to 'serious' art, and that antagonism is reflected in *Square Wig*, an irreverent portrait of the 'artworld' insider, which Williams portrays as having a penchant for severe haircuts and chunky glasses. It is a faceless wooden head sporting a valancelike bob displayed in a glass vitrine. Like a court jester, Williams's sardonic representation of this hierarchy, which always appears exclusive and impregnable from the outside, pokes fun at the prevalent orthodoxy of artistic production.

Almost all of the objects on show are rendered futile and ridiculous. They attempt in a subtle and tacit way to recognise the experience of being marginalised. But in throwing a brick at blandness, Williams attempts to make cultural peculiarities robust through laughter.

CIARA HEALY

LOTTE GERTZ

Lotte Gertz: *New Work*
Mary Mary, Glasgow
8 June – 4 August

It would be easy to underestimate or even dismiss Lotte Gertz's latest series of works as belonging to a mark-making tradition that glorifies material and exalts gesture *über alles*. Her most recent oeuvre risks being labelled 'tasteful', 'restrained', 'delicate' or a number of other (pejorative) adjectives long applied by critics to 'women artists' (or worse, to 'lady' artists). If anything, Gertz seems aware of these potentially gendered readings, and subtly embraces and subverts them. Indeed, a closer look at these paintings and prints (all 2012) is rewarded by a growing sense of the artist's self-assuredness – even verve – in her handling of materials, imagery and subject matter.

So there's a kind of nonplussed spiritedness in Gertz's commitment to exploring what could be deemed well-worn, even clichéd ideas and strategies (the trace, the gesture, the facsimile), and it is this playful defiance that gives the works their energy. Glimpses of mundane, functional

objects and figures – a cat with a stripy tail, a cup of tea, a potted plant, plates of food – appear alongside hints of almost recognisable 'high art': fragments of 'annunciations' and 'temptations' drawn from art history and other sources. Both 'sets' of images are suspended within loose, gestural smears and washes of paint that threaten to eclipse their potential to 'represent'. But the apparently contradictory attempt to unite sacred and profane imagery is less absurd than it might appear, owing as much to 'old' art history (Northern Renaissance still lifes and genre painting; Chardin; Fantin-Latour) as it does to Modernism, Postmodernism and beyond.

In a number of paintings and prints, the referents to which these images point can seem variable, ambiguous and unspecifiable, yet they are not quite the floating signifiers they appear to be. In only momentarily dropping the anchor between signifier and signified, identifiable shapes and forms emerge fleetingly, then teasingly reappear, both visually and in equally slippery, literary titles: these, some lifted from writers such as David Foster Wallace (*Believing with All Your Might*) and Virginia Woolf (*Mirrors for Heroic Action*), further the poetic, allusive aspect of the works.

Gertz's handling of paint often looks much like Helen Frankenthaler's soak-stain technique, in which pigment seeps into and stains the canvas. Here, though, the absorption of paint is greater and the effect less monumental, due in part to the translucency and raglike look of the linen and muslin surfaces of the paintings and prints. The surfaces and edges of some seem to be composed of scraps or used cloths that may have been scattered or dumped in a studio, kitchen or nursery. It is the use of such ephemeral materials, and their associations with contamination and domesticity, which perhaps brings Gertz's work closer to the abjection of Mike Kelley than to Frankenthaler's large-scale postpainterly abstraction. In this sense, perhaps the artist leans towards becoming a 'true ecologist', in Slavoj Žižek's words, in her attempt to 're-establish the aesthetics of beauty within the realm of human trash and material waste'.

SUSANNAH THOMPSON



Bedwyr Williams
Sentry Box, 2012, wood, paint
 277 x 100 x 100 cm. Photo: Stuart
 Whipps. Courtesy Ikon,
 Birmingham



Lotte Gertz
Mirrors for Heroic Action I,
 2012, acrylic paint and coloured
 pencil on muslin, 61 x 71 cm.
 Courtesy the artist and Mary Mary,
 Glasgow